

THE CINEMATIC ESSAY: THE CINE *WHAT?*
(with Filmography & Bibliography)
Notes for a lecture by Peter Thompson
(Rev: 11/12/05)

In the fourth grade, Miss Rich taught us all how to write an Essay. This is what she taught us:

- No personal experience! (irrelevant),
- No personal pronouns! (irrelevant),
- Don't state what *you* think! (who cares?),
- State your premise! (Miss Rich had given it to us),
- Gather your evidence! (this, too, Miss Rich had given to us),
- Discuss aspects of the premise by ordering the evidence! (Miss Rich had numbered everything on the board the week before),
- Make smooth transitions! (up to us),
- Re-state what you have done.

For many years, I followed the recipe given to us by Miss Rich. Then I learned about the Informal Essay that had been born from the union between travel writing and the Essay. The Informal Essay can be characterized in this way:

- *Flexibility*--it can change forms of narrative address on a dime and speak directly and very simply to its audience--unlike a short story author who generally creates a character to be his or her mouthpiece. The essayist can, in other words, step out of character.
- *Self-reflexivity*--it can acknowledge the presence of the author.
- *Self-criticality* --it can acknowledge, analyze and critique its own processes as it writes itself. Its territory can stay small or expand to fit the mind of the essayist as it evolves there. An essay can be linked with other essays and other fictions, or non-fictions.
- *Blurred narrative boundaries*--it can absorb or incorporate different genres and tones and themes. It can incorporate biography, autobiography, history, culture, poetry, fiction, criticism, photographs, drawings, and *film*.

Film?

QUALITIES OF CONTEMPORARY CINEMATIC ESSAYS

The marvelous, flexible qualities of the contemporary Informal Essay have now found their ways into contemporary film in the form of the Cinematic Essay, the newest film genre that incorporates the other three (documentary, fiction, and experimental), as appropriate.

How does the Cinematic Essay work? Well, for example, what the previous generation of documentary filmmakers took as their "subject"--a passive subject

as compared to the "active" fictional subject--film essayists can now take as their *theme* in which the subject is a particular development or an interpretation of that theme, and *one that has a determining influence upon the form of the film*. The theme thereby becomes extremely active in that the cinematic essay is often a *meditation on ideas in conflict* and *these conflicts actually suggest the form* that the film might take. "The cinematic revolution now in progress is based on what is essentially a very simple idea: that a subject can engender form and that to choose a subject is to make an aesthetic choice." (Noel Burch, "Non-Fictional Subjects", from THE THEORY OF FILM PRACTICE).

Some salient aspects of the modern Cinematic Essay as a form:

- Meditation on a Theme Substituted for Plot
- Disunity of Time, Space, Tone, Materials, Style
- Modularity
- Suspension of Belief (as opposed to Suspension of *Dis*-belief)
- Self Criticism / Self Reflexivity
- Non-Anticipatory Camera
- Medium shots
- Editing strategies varied

SOME ANTECEDENTS TO THE CINEMATIC ESSAY

BERTOLT BRECHT

Brecht's career started in the 20's with *Lehrstücke*: anti-illusionist, didactic plays. The later Brecht emphasized the dialectic mode, or the *alternation* of anti-illusionist and illusionist elements. Example: in 1955, Brecht and director Wolfgang Staudte worked together on a film version of "Mother Courage". They worked well together during the script stage. Then there were differences: Brecht wanted to have print stock which flickered like the old Edison cylinders matched to modern sound. Staudte didn't because he believed in the uniformity of elements. Brecht wanted to *contrast word and image*. The project ended because of the disagreement.

Brecht's *Epic Theater*: he strove for a "demonstrating", non-illusionistic style of presentation, which broke stories into modular units or central moments. Brecht wanted to use *documentary film* in theater as a kind of "optical chorus". That is to say, documentary film would function like a commentary medium. This is a surprising use of documentary because we tend to think of the genre of documentary as objective, factual. Brecht wanted to "undocument" the genre, to subject its subject to overt manipulation by the filmmaker.

Hans-Berhard Moeller: "Brecht and 'Epic' Film Medium" in WIDE ANGLE: "The salient point in the documentary chorus example, in Brecht's incorporation of film projections into plays and in the Brechtian film is the *separation of elements*." "The basic method of the Brechtian film is thus to polarize action, sound, accompanying music and the narrative voice, to bring them into conflict. Unity should be discontinuous, contradictory, dialectical".

George Lellis: "I am convinced that in terms of what kind of fiction films should be made, Brecht is the theorist to contend with. The central question of how form

affects content is one of the knottiest of our time, and no other writer about theatrical aesthetics calls into question what the relationship between film and spectator should be with the same degree of modernity.”

SOME POST-BRECHTIAN FILMMAKERS

ALEXANDER KLUGE's separation of elements in “Artists Under the Big Top: Perplexed” (1968) used footage of Hitler reviewing the Wehrmacht accompanied by the Beatles' music.

MICHEL VERHOEVEN's “Matings” (1968). Scenes are depicted in completely different color gels. In “The Ditch” (1971) the protagonists break character and discuss problems confronting them in their professional lives. In “OK” (1970) the actors are introduced into the film, play their parts, and then are reintroduced back out into the real world at the end of the film. It is a Vietnam film played in Bavaria with the GI's speaking Bayerisch with intertitles and voice over narration. STRAUB-HUILLET's films.

SOME THEORETICAL TOOLS

Sigfried Kracauer in his THEORY OF FILM comments on the “*found story*”: one in which the filmmaker discovers patterns in an open-ended way, unstaged, indeterminate (what Paul Rötha called the “*slight narrative*”). Kracauer's comments on the “*sleuthing motif*”, which is that of seeking out the truth and driving the filmmaker into the raw material of life and upholding the importance of the world.

The sleuthing motif involves *the accidental*, refers to scientific inquiries as a model, looks to material clues closely, and involves *the chase*.

SOME EXAMPLES OF THE CINEMATIC ESSAY

(Compiled by Peter Thompson. Revised: 11/12/05)

* film in the Columbia College Chicago Film and Video Collection.

** film available in video at Facets Multimedia

Chantal Ackerman, LETTERS FROM NEW YORK

Ralph Arlyck, AN ACQUIRED TASTE (1981)

CURRENT EVENTS (1989)

Alan Berliner, INTIMATE STRANGER

Tony Bubba, LIGHTNING OVER BRADDOCK

Jean Cocteau, TESTAMENT OF ORPHEUS

Jonathan Demme, SWIMMING TO CAMBODIA *

Harun Farocki, IMAGES OF THE WORLD AND THE INSCRIPTION OF WAR,
1989, 75 minutes.

Frederico Fellini, ROMA

Morgan Fisher, ACADEMY LEADER

Su Friedrich, THE TIES THAT BIND

SINK OR SWIM

Jean-Luc Godard, MASCULIN-FEMININE *
LETTER TO JANE (1972)
ICI ET AILLEURS (1974)
HISTOIRE(S) DU CINEMA
Jill Godmilow, FAR FROM POLAND *
Jean-Pierre Gorin, POTO AND CABENGO (1982)
ROUTINE PLEASURES

Vanalyne Green, A SPY IN THE HOUSE THAT RUTH BUILT (1989)
Werner Herzog, FATA MORGANA
Joris Ivens, STORY OF THE WIND
Jon Jost, SPEAKING DIRECTLY: SOME AMERICAN NOTES (1973) **
UNCOMMON SENSES: PLAIN TALK & COMMON SENSE (1988)*

Isaac Julian, LOOKING FOR LANGSTON

Patrick Keiller, LONDON

Alexander Kluge's short films made for TV.

Louis Malle, PHANTOM INDIA

MY DINNER WITH ANDRE

Chris Marker,

SANS SOLEIL (1982)

SOY MEXICO

THE KOUMIKO MYSTERY

CUBA, SI

THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE SINGER--YVES

MONTAND

THE ABYSS OF THE AIR IS RED

IF I HAD FOUR CAMELS

LE JOLI MAI **

STATUES ALSO DIE

SUNDAY IN PEKING

LETTER FROM SIBERIA

DESCRIPTION OF A COMBAT

AMERICA DREAMS

THE LAST BOLSHEVIK

Ross McElwee, SHERMAN'S MARCH * V7629

SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE WALL (1990)

TIME INDEFINITE

Michael Moore, ROGER AND ME

BOWLING FOR COLUMBINE (2002)

FAHRENHEIT 9/11 (2004)

Errol Morris, THE THIN BLUE LINE *

FAST, CHEAP AND OUT OF CONTROL

THE FOG OF WAR

Pier Paolo Pasolini, NOTES TOWARD AN AFRICAN ORESTES (1970) *

Yvonne Rainer, PRIVILEGE (1991)

Alain Resnais, NIGHT AND FOG *

Jean Rouch, JAGUAR (1967)

Michael Rubbo, WAITING FOR FIDEL (1974)

Morgan Spurlock, SUPERSIZE ME: A FILM OF EPIC PORTIONS (2004)

Hans-Jurgen Syberberg, OUR HITLER: A FILM FROM GERMANY

Kidlat Tahimik, THE PERFUMED NIGHTMARE

Peter Thompson, UNIVERSAL HOTEL (1986) *

UNIVERSAL CITIZEN (1987) *

Trihn, Min-ha T., NAKED SPACES: LIFE IS ROUND (1985)

Peter Watkins, EDVARD MUNCH

Orson Welles, F FOR FAKE (1973) (VD729)

FILMING "OTHELLO" (1978)

Wim Wenders, NICK'S FILM: LIGHTNING OVER WATER * (V7671)

TOKYO GA*

Michael Verhoeven, OK (1970)

THE DITCH (1971)

SOME BOOKS AND ARTICLES ON THE CINEMATIC ESSAY

(Revised: 11/12/05)

Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of the New Avant-Garde: La camera-stylo", in THE NEW WAVE, Doubleday, NY 1968. (classic article written in 1948 which began it all...)

Noel Burch, "Nonfictional Subjects", in THEORY OF FILM PRACTICE, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981. (examines the history of the non-fictional film and centers on two promising contemporary forms, the essay film and the ritual film. This book is one of my **most** used reference books as a filmmaker—even though Birch, in his introduction, renounces much of it....)

Italo Calvino, "Cinema and the Novel: Problems of Narrative", in THE USES OF LITERATURE, New York, Houghton, Mifflin, (speaks to the essay-film as the form which seems most rich in its narrative possibilities).

Louis Giamatti, "The Cinematic Essay", in GODARD AND THE OTHERS: ESSAYS IN CINEMATIC FORM, London, Tantivy Press, 1975.
(very readable, insightful essays on aspects of forming the film essay with immediate applicability to filmmaking.)

Chris Marker, COMMENTAIRES, volumes I, II, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1967. (in French; extremely creative translations of film-essays in written and photographic forms).

Phillip Lopate, "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film", in BEYOND DOCUMENT: ESSAYS ON NONFICTION FILM, edited by Charles Warren, Wesleyan University Press, 1998. pages 243-270. (A lovely, detailed attempt to define the genre of the cinematic essay. Very good).

Jonas Mekas, "The Changing Language of Cinema", MOVIE JOURNAL: THE RISE OF A NEW AMERICAN CINEMA, 1959-1971, Collier Books, NY, 1972. pps. 48-50.

Jonas Mekas, "The Changing Techniques of Cinema", MOVIE JOURNAL: THE RISE OF A NEW AMERICAN CINEMA, 1959-1971, Collier Books, NY, 1972. pps. 91-93.

Jonas Mekas, "In Defense of Godard", MOVIE JOURNAL: THE RISE OF A NEW AMERICAN CINEMA, 1959-1971, Collier Books, NY, 1972. pps. 204-205.

Hans-Bernhard Moeller, "Brecht and 'Epic' Film Medium: The Cineaste Playwrite, Film Theoretician and His Influence", WIDE ANGLE, 19--.

Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Looking for America: Uncommon Senses", THE READER, August 26, 1988. (a look at some of the salient characteristics of the contemporary film essay by the guy whose got my vote as the finest working film critic in America.)

Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Girl with a Camera: Videos by Sadie Benning", THE READER, November 15, 1991.

Hans-Jurgen Syberberg, HITLER: A FILM FROM GERMANY, Farrar, Straus, -Giroux, NY, 1982. (the complete screenplay, with photographs, of the seven- hour film essay).

Hans-Jurgen Syberberg, SYBERBERG, Paris, Cahiers du Cinema, hors-serie, Editions de l'Etoile, February, 1980. (in French; an account of the making of

OUR HITLER, including the frontal projection techniques in that film).
Wim Wenders and Chris Sievernich, NICK'S FILM: LIGHTNING OVER WATER,
Zweitausendeins, Frankfurt am Mein, 1981. (the complete screenplay, with
photographs, of the film essay).

SOME WRITTEN ESSAYS OF INTEREST TO FILMMAKERS

The following match many of the attributes of the cinematic essay: flexibility, self-criticality, shifting narrative forms, self-referentiality, etc.)

Paul Auster, THE INVENTION OF SOLITUDE, Penguin Books, NY, 1982.
(an extraordinary mixture of forms—memoir, fiction, news stories, diary)
James Baldwin, NOBODY KNOWS MY NAME, 1961
THE FIRE NEXT TIME, 1963
Elias Cannetti, THE VOICES OF MARREKESH, Continuum, NY, 1972.
(fabulous, circular travel essays of the West meets East variety by a Nobel
prize winner—see especially “Encounters with Camels” and the last one
entitled “The Unseen”).
Joan Didion, THE WHITE BOOK, -----
SLOUCHING TOWARD BETHLEHEM,-----
SALVADOR,-----
Annie Dillard, editor, THE BEST AMERICAN ESSAYS 1988, Ticknor and Fields, NY,
1988. (this is a very fine anthology of very different and stimulating approaches
to the form. Excellent intro, too—a must-read. I also heartily recommend each
of the yearly compilations in this series that has a different editor).
Loren Eiseley, “The Star Thrower”, — ?, 1969.
William Gass, ON BEING BLUE: A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY, David Godine,
Boston, 1979. (tour-de-force variations on the theme of “blue-ness”).
Peter Handke, A SORROW BEYOND DREAMS: A LIFE STORY, translated by
Ralph Mannheim, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.
(extraordinarily, deeply felt essay on the girlhood, adult life and suicide of
Handke's mother, and of his relationship to her and to her loss).
Maxine Hong Kingston, THE WOMAN WARRIOR (this, too, is a mix of forms,
including creating a fictional character out of a real character.)
Barry Lopez, DESERT NOTES, -----
ARCTIC DREAMS: IMAGINATION AND DESIRE IN A NORTHERN
LANDSCAPE, Charles Scribner's Sons, NY 1986.
“The Raven”, -----
James McConkey, COURT OF MEMORY, -----, 1981.
Herman Melville, “The Encantadas”, in THE PIAZZA TALES, NY, Doubleday,
1961. (travel essays so dense and finely wrought that they have often been
mistaken for fiction).
Michel de Montaigne, ESSAYS, Penguin Books, NY 1976. (THE classic).
Jan Morris, DESTINATIONS: ESSAYS FROM ROLLING STONE, New York,
Oxford University Press/Rolling Stone, 1980.
Richard Selzer, LETTERS TO A YOUNG DOCTOR, Simon and Schuster, NY, 1982.
(essays by a doctor-writer on the issues of learning and care that come out of
his own life. Very good.)
Gay Talese, editor, THE BEST AMERICAN ESSAYS 1987, Ticknor and Fields, NY,
1987.
Diane Wakowski, ESSAY ON REVISION, Santa Barbara, Black Swallow Press, 19--.
(brilliant, informal example of a piece of art about the process of recognizing
its own theme and creating the piece itself).

You might wish to look for other essays written by:
Cynthia Ozick,
Francine du Plessix Gray,
Elizabeth Hardwick,
Edward Hoagland,
Edward Abbey,
Peter Mattheisson,
May Sarton.

Look also for the magazine of international writing in English called GRANTA that publishes fabulous contemporary examples of the essay form. (subscription address: Subscription Service Department, c/o P.O. Box 909, Farmingdale, NY 11737).